

April 2005 Newsletter

New Evidence on the Secret Nuclear Alert of October 1969:

The Henry A. Kissinger Telcons

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In two articles we published in January 2003 on President Richard M. Nixon's secret nuclear alert of October 13-28, 1969, we were able to establish that the rumored operation had in fact taken place, to describe the manner of its execution, and to solve the mystery of why Nixon ordered it.(1) Intent upon settling the Vietnam War on his own terms, Nixon hoped the alert would "jar" both the Soviet Union and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) into making concessions. The alert, whose official name was "Joint Chiefs of Staff Readiness Test," failed in its purpose, but it was one of the early exercises of Nixon's self-styled "madman theory"—"the principle of the threat of excessive force."(2)

Even though our articles drew on a substantial body of recently declassified documents in the archives of the White House, several military headquarters commands, and the office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, important questions remained partially or wholly unanswered. Did anyone else know about the purpose of the alert besides a small inner circle composed of President Nixon, his assistant for national security affairs Henry A. Kissinger, Kissinger's aide Colonel Alexander M. Haig, Nixon's chief of staff H. R. Haldeman, Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird, and Laird's aide Colonel Robert E. Pursley? On precisely what date did Nixon and Kissinger order Laird and Earle J. Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to begin planning the alert?

When and how did the Department of State learn about the alert? Did the White House inform Secretary of State William P. Rogers about the purpose of the alert? How did the Soviets, Chinese, and North Vietnamese interpret the alert and respond to it? Did American military intelligence detect Soviet, Chinese, and North Vietnamese reactions? To what extent were Nixon and Kissinger concerned about the anti-Vietnam War movement and the larger American public learning of their strategy? Released by the National Archives and Records Administration on May 26, 2004, Henry A. Kissinger's Telephone Conversation Transcripts (telcons) shed more light on these questions, provide surprising answers to some of them, and raise additional questions about the history of the alert. (3)

Previously declassified documents had led us to conclude that it was President Nixon who had ordered Laird on the evening of October 6 to begin planning the secret nuclear alert. His purpose was to compensate for having recently decided to cancel the massive bombing and mining operation—secretly code-named DUCK HOOK—that he had threatened to unleash against North Vietnam unless Hanoi yielded to Washington's terms by November 1. Nixon may have wanted the Soviets and North Vietnamese to think the alert was a lead-up to DUCK HOOK before Moscow and Hanoi discovered that the operation had been scratched. Perhaps he was hoping that the alert itself would jar Hanoi into concessions or send a signal to Moscow about the risks of its support for Hanoi, thus leveraging the Soviets into putting pressure on the North Vietnamese to soften their diplomatic position. But even if the bluff failed, Nixon thought, it might salvage his reputation for toughness and irrationality despite his having backed down from launching DUCK HOOK.(4) We still believe this analysis of purpose is correct, but the transcript of a conversation between Kissinger and Laird on the morning of October 6 indicates that

the planning process for the alert had begun earlier than the evening of the sixth and that it was Kissinger, acting for Nixon, who first brought the matter up with Laird.

On instructions from Nixon, Kissinger was primed that morning to urge Laird to prepare an operation that had *nuclear* implications; namely to put U.S. strategic forces on a higher DEFCON(5) alert status. Kissinger initially brought up the subject by remarking that he had noticed that a "SAC [Strategic Air Command] exercise" was scheduled to take place in October. "I'm all for it," he said, "but I just want to know what it is. Has it been announced?" When Laird answered that it had not been announced, Kissinger asked: "Will the other side pick this up? We want them to." Laird responded: "They will pick it up. The fact that we are exercising our bombers." But Kissinger was not satisfied that the exercise was of sufficient magnitude: "Could you exercise the DEFCONS for a day or so in October? I'll give you a brief as to why." Laird said, "we can," to which Kissinger replied, "the president will appreciate it very much."(6)

In the days following October 6, the Pentagon prepared recommendations for military measures designed to get the attention of Moscow and Hanoi. According to an October 10 telcon between Kissinger and Laird, Nixon had approved on the night of October 9 "the exercises that are to be laid on for October 13 and 14 and running through that week." Laird, however, was "concerned" about two issues. The first had to do with the requirement that allies were supposed to be notified about DEFCONS. Laird asked: "We will not be contacting our allies (Canada or NATO) on any of these?" Kissinger confirmed that the United States would not contact allies, because "we were worried about getting the allies involved." The next part of the discussion is murky. Kissinger remarked that "all of these activities will get some sort of signal—they will get the word, but there will be no DEFCON. There is no military significance to this." "They" could refer to the allies or the Soviets.

Laird's other concern was whether the alert was connected with or "contingent in any way on the other operation that is going to be discussed on Saturday [October 11]." As written down by the transcriber, Laird's reference to the "other operation" is vague, but he may have been referring to a previously scheduled exercise involving nuclear missile submarines. In any event, Kissinger "affirmed it has nothing to do with that," and "he told L to go ahead and execute this—he has a signed paper from the president that he wants it."(7)

What Kissinger was saying was that he wanted nuclear signals for political rather than military purposes, and, in order to preserve the operation's secrecy, the signals could not be called a DEFCON. Appreciating Laird's concern, as well as his reluctance to sign on, Kissinger referred to "a signed paper" from Nixon, which may or may not have existed (at least it has not yet surfaced in White House papers).

The exercise that got under way on October 13 included a "stand down" of SAC's nuclear bomber force, which had the effect of increasing the number of bombers on ground alert and signaling that steps were being taken to improve force readiness. The telcons reveal that even at this late date no one had yet informed the Department of State about the operation. When Kissinger asked about it, Laird said he had not told Secretary Rogers but that his military aide would soon report to State's executive secretary, Theodore Eliot, that a "routine SAC exercise" was under way and that Nixon was aware of it. In a telcon the next day, Kissinger learned from Laird that Eliot had been told and he had also briefed Elliot Richardson, Rogers' deputy. Still, no one at State had been informed about the purpose of the alert. Even after Eliot and Richardson had asked "what it was all about," they were advised that "they would have to ask the highest authority about it." The telcons yield no answers, however, to the question of whether Rogers or Richardson ever learned about the purpose of the alert.

In any event, the press and others took notice of the stand down. On the fourteenth, Laird told Kissinger that reporters near a SAC base were asking "why there were no planes flying" and that SAC headquarters was also receiving press inquiries about the matter. When Laird requested guidance for the Defense Department's response, Kissinger asked him to hold off until the next day, October 15. The first Moratorium against the Vietnam War was to occur that day, and Kissinger told Laird that he "would hate to see the peaceniks worked up about this." (8)

Kissinger, of course, wanted the Soviets to notice and react to the operation, and by October 17 he thought he had reason to believe they had. Late in the afternoon of that day, Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin had phoned Kissinger to say that he had a message on the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks that he wanted to deliver to President Nixon and "that there may also be some further discussion on Soviet/American relations." (Dobrynin's request would soon result in the scheduling of a meeting between Nixon, Kissinger, and Dobrynin on October 20.) Apparently persuaded that Dobrynin's phone call was a response to the nuclear alert, Kissinger told Laird the next day that "the game plan seems to be working" and that there might be a "little payoff." (9)

A cryptic record of an October 14 Kissinger conversation with New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller, one of his most important patrons, suggests that Kissinger had brought the governor into the secret shortly after the alert got underway. When he spoke with Rockefeller again on the morning of October 20, just hours before the Nixon-Kissinger-Dobrynin meeting, he told him that "the thing they had discussed the other day—it's gotten down to producing little twitches." In addition, he said that "there's now a 30 percent chance—it would be sheer gold if we could get away with it." An hour or so later, in a conversation with Pentagon planner Fritz Kraemer, an early mentor who had a formative influence on his career, Kissinger was far more cautious. Now he saw only a "10 percent chance" of success and admitted that "it has no business succeeding, but it may." Perhaps Kissinger was more careful when speaking with Kraemer because he recognized that the chances of the Soviet's falling for the administration's bluff were remote. (10)

The much anticipated meeting with Dobrynin turned out to be a disappointment for Nixon and Kissinger. The nuclear alert did not come up for discussion. Dobrynin offered nothing new on the Vietnam question, and he countered Nixon's pre-meeting big stick diplomacy by offering carrots of negotiation on arms control and European security issues. (11) In a telephone conversation after the meeting, Nixon suggested that Kissinger meet again with Dobrynin in the morning of the twenty-first and engage in madman playacting: "If the Vietnam thing is raised (try to get it raised)," the transcriber wrote, "the P wants K to shake his head and say 'I am sorry Mr. Ambassador, but he is out of control. . . . He's made up his mind and unless there's some movement,' just shake your head and walk out." (12)

Perhaps when Dobrynin's side of the back channel is published, a better understanding will emerge of what motivated his October 17 phone call and whether it was a reaction to the U.S. alert, as Kissinger had originally believed. In any event, U.S. intelligence continued looking and listening for signs of Soviet responses. The telcons give us a few clues on what was picked up. They suggest, for example, that at least as early as October 14 U.S. intelligence had detected Soviet reactions or countermeasures to the alert, one day after it began. (13)

The alert also had an unintended consequence. On October 21 Laird informed Kissinger that Beijing had reacted: "they have gone on alert." The next day, the two men discussed the memo on the Chinese alert that Laird had forwarded. Kissinger said that he "didn't know whether it was a reaction to us or what the Soviets did in reaction to us." Laird said that "he didn't know either." (14) Alarming the Chinese was not

part of the game plan. The American alert came at the end of a tense period in Sino-Soviet relations, and Beijing was in all likelihood more nervous than before about the intent of the Soviets' actions. The Chinese reaction indicates that Nixon's nuclear alert may have been more dangerous than we first thought.

Notes

(1) William Burr and Jeffrey Kimball, "Nixon's Secret Nuclear Alert: Vietnam War Diplomacy and the Joint Chiefs of Staff Readiness Test, October 1969," *Cold War History* 3 (January 2003): 113-156; and "Nixon's Nuclear Ploy," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 59, 1 (January/February 2003): 28-37, 72-73. Earlier, in *The Price of Power: Kissinger in the Nixon White House* (New York: Summit Books, 1983), pp. 124-125, Seymour M. Hersh, using information from his informants, briefly discussed one element of the alert and suggested that it was a manifestation of Nixon's threat strategy against the Soviet Union and its "allies," implying it was in some way related to DUCK HOOK. Based on a documented analysis of Nixon's strategic thinking and his administration's steps before and during October, and building on Hersh's limited information about the nature of the alert, Jeffrey Kimball, in *Nixon's Vietnam War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 164, made a more direct link between the alert, Nixon's madman theory, and the several threats Nixon directed against Hanoi in connection with DUCK HOOK. With access to the Strategic Air Command's history of the JCS Readiness Test, Wayne Thompson, in *To Hanoi and Back: The United States Air Force and North Vietnam, 1966-1973* (Washington, D.C.: Air Force History and Museums Program/USAF, 2000), 167-168, described the alert as an attempt by Nixon "to underline the seriousness of his ultimatum to Moscow and Hanoi." We were unaware of Thompson's brief account when we wrote papers and articles on the alert in 2001-2002, in which we drew upon the SAC history of the alert and a host of other documents. Scott Sagan and Jeremy Suri, who had originally argued in a 2002 conference paper that the alert was related to the Sino-Soviet crisis, followed our interpretation of Nixon's actions in their later article, "The Madman Nuclear Alert: Secrecy, Signaling, and Safety in October 1969," *International Security*, 27, 4 (Spring 2003): 150-183.

(2) "Jar" is from Memo, Laird to Kissinger, 21 February 1969, box, 1007, Haig's Vietnam File, Vol. 1 (Jan.-March 1969), National Security Council Files, Nixon Presidential Materials Project (NPMP); and Journal/Diary entry, October 17, 1969, Journals and Diaries of Harry Robbins Haldeman (JDHRH), NPMP. "Madman theory and "principle" are from H. R. Haldeman, with Joseph DiMona, *The Ends of Power* (New York: Times Books, 1978), 82-83.

(3) For background information on the telcons and their declassification, see the Web sites of the National Archives and Records Administration, "Henry A. Kissinger Telephone Conversation Transcripts (Telcons)," <http://nixon.archives.gov/find/textual/presidential/nsc/kissinger/telcons.html>; and the National Security Archive, "The Kissinger Telcons," <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB123/index.html>.

(4) Burr and Kimball, "Nixon's Secret Nuclear Alert," 115, 126-134.

(5) This acronym refers to a graduated scale of Defense Readiness Conditions or military alert postures from DEFCON 4 or 5 (normal peacetime posture) to DEFCON 1 (deployed for attack).

(6) Telcon, Laird, 11:40 A.M., October 6, 1969, box 2, Henry A. Kissinger Telephone Conversation Transcripts, NPMP. The transcriber, unfamiliar with the term DEFCON, typed "DevCon" instead.

(7) Telcon, Laird, 12:40 P.M., October 10, 1969, HAK Telcons, NPMP. Regarding the submarine exercise,

see

Burr and Kimball, "Nixon's Secret Nuclear Alert," 133.

(8) Telcons, Laird, 12:05 P.M., October 13, 1969, and 5:35 P.M., October 14, 1969, HAK Telcons, NPMP.

(9) Telcons, Dobrynin, 4:40 P.M., October 17, 1969; and Laird, 5:15 P.M., October 18, 1969, *ibid.*

(10) Telcons, Rockefeller, 4:50 P.M., October 14, 1969, and 11:10 A.M., October 20, 1969; and Kraemer, 12:30 P.M., October 20, 1969, *ibid.*

(11) Burr and Kimball, "Nixon's Secret Nuclear Alert," 129, 141-142.

(12) Telcon, Nixon, 8:20 P.M., October 20, 1969, HAK Telcons, NPMP.

(13) Telcon, Rockefeller, 4:50 P.M., October 14, 1969, *ibid.*

(14) Telcons, Laird, 6:23 P.M., October 21, 1969; and Laird, 8:25 A.M., October 22, 1969, *ibid.*

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